

**PRELIMINARY MANAGEMENT PLAN
for the
BECKMAN WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA**

**Incorporating:
Barber Property**

INTRODUCTION

LeRoy Byron Beckman's Last Will and Testament established the RBB Deer Lands Trust Fund to acquire "WINTER-SUMMER range lands PRIMARILY FOR DEER, as a Public Hunting Ground". Mr. Beckman's Will then instructs the RBB Deer Lands Trust Fund to transfer the title and management of the land to the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP).

Because of the 1987 Wildlife Habitat Acquisition Act (House Bill 526) the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Commission adopted rules that specify a Preliminary Management Plan be written before any final action shall be taken on newly acquired lands. This Preliminary Management Plan is intended to give an immediate general analysis and to provide the basis for public comment. It is proposed that MFWP accept as a gift the 1,674 acre Barber Property from the RBB Deer Lands Trust Fund and incorporate it into the adjacent Beckman Wildlife Management Area.

The Preliminary Management Plan identifies MFWP's management goals for the property. More specific work activities will be formulated for the final Management Plan after proper inventories have been made, compliance requirements met, and after public comments have been reviewed. Once a final Management Plan is in place, it will be reviewed periodically and necessary adjustments incorporated.

After the Steiners' Trail's End Ranch, the Fertterer and then the Green properties were purchased and gifted to MFWP these last 6 years, they became the Beckman Wildlife Management Area (BWMA). The BWMA is managed by MFWP, primarily for mule and white-tailed deer and upland game birds. Agricultural practices such as producing hay and grazing livestock are used as necessary to meet habitat objectives for the primary wildlife species, and for other wildlife species when appropriate.

AREA DESCRIPTION

Location and Physiographic Characteristics:

The Barber Property (Property) is 1,674 acres located in the Judith River breaks, Fergus County, 12 miles northeast of Denton, Montana (see map Appendix 1). Combined with the

adjacent Beckman WMA, total acreage will equal 6,564 acres. The Property lies in two disjunct parcels, both of which have a common boundary with the WMA. An 1,114-acre parcel of the Property will newly define the northwest corner of the WMA. To the east, lands (560 acres) that typify the 'river breaks' habitat and grade into grassland benches will define the new northeast WMA boundary corner.

The Judith River flows from the southwest to the northeast across 3.6 miles of the existing WMA. Along the river are almost 1000 acres of bottomlands. The remaining acres are classified as river breaks, including most of the Barber Property. These breaks consist of steep-sided coulees with ridges and gently sloping benches that drain into the bottoms. There are 12 coulees that run water intermittently, in which there are 7 perennial springs. The Barber Property will substantially complete acquisition of the headwaters of three of the largest coulees flowing into the WMA west of the Judith River. The WMA's east boundary is a bluff, 200 feet high, overlooking the river.

Elevations of the Property range from 3,100 to 3,940 feet. Bottomlands along the Judith River and Wolf Creek run at elevations from 3020 to 3100 feet. Soils are generally deep well drained clay loams. Annual precipitation ranges from 12 to 16 inches. The mean temperature is 44 degrees Fahrenheit. The average frost-free period is 120 to 130 days.

Legal description of the proposed project property:

County: Fergus

Township 19 North, Range 16 East, M.P.M. (Tract I)

Section 21: E1/2SE1/4
Section 22: SW1/4
Section 27: NW1/4
Section 28: NW1/4NE1/4, N1/2NW1/4
Section 29: NE1/4NE1/4

Township 19 North, Range 15 East, M.P.M. (TractII)

Section 25: SE1/4NE1/4, N1/2NE1/4, E1/2NW1/4, NE1/4SW1/4

Township 19 North, Range 16 East, M.P.M. (TractIII)

Section 29: S1/2SW1/4
Section 30: Lots1,2,3 and 4 (W1/2W1/2), E1/2W1/2, W1/2NE1/4, SE1/4, SE1/4NE1/4
Section 31: Lots1,2,5 and 6
Section 32: NW1/4NW1/4

Total Deeded = 1674.67 acres

The accompanying map (Appendix 1) displays the lands affected by the proposal. The project's exterior boundary is irregularly shaped although it shares 4 miles of common boundary with the existing WMA. Eleven different private landowners control property

bordering the WMA with its Barber addition. The Bear Springs county road runs along the northern edge of a portion of the Barber Property. A separate county road penetrates the existing WMA, where it dead-ends at the headquarter buildings. There are no state or federal lands encumbered or leased in conjunction with this Property or the WMA.

Vegetation

Present

The Beckman WMA is described as river breaks habitat, consisting of 3 major vegetative types. The Ponderosa pine / Douglas fir-juniper type occurs on the more moist aspects of ridges and coulees. A grassland type occupies the drier benches and sidehills and is dominated by western wheatgrass, needle-and-thread and blue grama. Most of the river bottom riparian type consists of cottonwood / willow stands (about 250 acres) and grassland terraces (about 400 acres). The cottonwood / willow stands also have understory vegetation comprised of western snowberry, Wood's rose, chokecherry, silver buffaloberry, and red osier dogwood. Most riparian grassland terraces have been cultivated into alfalfa and tame grass hay fields.

The Barber Property is upland river breaks habitat, consisting of three major vegetative types. A ponderosa pine / Douglas fir-juniper type occurs on the more moist ridges and coulees, a shrub-grassland / ponderosa pine type buffers the p. pine / Douglas fir-juniper type and a riparian type occurs adjacent to the Judith River as well as along Wolf Creek. Active farming occurs on 51 acres of the Property. An additional 135 acres are presently enrolled in the federal Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). That contract expires in 2012. Commercial timber exists only in miniscule quantities and at questionable market value when financial and environmental costs are taken into consideration.

These vegetative types and their associated topographic features make the combined properties year-round habitat for mule and white-tailed deer. Sharp-tailed grouse and pronghorn antelope make significant use of the grassy upland benches. Merriam's turkeys, although uncommon, favor the pine/fir sites. Ring-necked pheasants make extensive use of the riparian vegetation on the river bottom. All of the vegetative types are utilized by a diverse group of small mammals and birds.

The Barber Property is currently managed as a satellite cow/calf operation. Approximately 80 cow/calf pairs are grazed seasonally (April-September) in 4 separate pastures. Those same cows are wintered and calve-out (December-April) on the smaller (approximately 280 acres) Wolf Creek portion of the Barber Property. These same cows are pastured off-site in October and November. Range condition is fair on most of the property, improving to good as distance from water sources increases.

Future

As stipulated in the Barber/Beckman Estate Purchase Agreement, livestock grazing

practices will be allowed to continue through a lease-back arrangement with the Barber family until the year 2012. That obligation is to seasonally graze these same pastures April 15 through September 30 annually. Cattle stocking rates will equal that amount determined by the Natural Resources and Conservation Service per lease agreement.

Further, a lease-back provision allows the Barber family to winter and calve these same animals on a specified 250 acre portion of the Property near Wolf Creek. Those 250 acres are available between the dates of December 15 to April 15. All livestock will be pastured off-site between October 1 and December 14, annually.

Maintenance and care of the 135 acres of CRP lands will remain the responsibility of the Barber family. Those efforts include weed management and compliance with federal contractual farm program terms.

A 51-acre cultivated and currently farmed field will be retained in agricultural production (alfalfa/small grains) through the year 2012. A sharecropping arrangement will be established between the Barber family and MFWP.

The above described grazing and cropping schedule will attract and hold deer on the property throughout most years. Improved vegetative condition, early green-up of the range and crop fields, regrowth of alfalfa after haying, and the increased amount of forage provided by palatable shrubs in the coulees and on the river bottoms will help alleviate deer use on adjacent landowners' crop and pasture lands.

Travel Plan

Present

Public motor vehicle access on the existing WMA is by means of one graveled county road that enters on the western border and continues into the center of the property, ending at the WMA headquarter buildings on the river bottom. Another vehicular trail splits off of the county road and provides access to the north portion of the WMA, ending in a designated parking area. Other unimproved dirt roads (closed to public access) on the Property lead to almost every field or pasture.

Barbers will assign an existing access right-of-way easement running from the Bear Springs County Road into section 21 (see map). At present and for the duration of the grazing and cropping leases, that access will be retained for administrative uses only.

Barbers will grant a new 60-foot access right-of-way easement from the Bear Springs County Road (in the immediate vicinity of the existing USAF missile silo) to the new WMA property line in section 21(see map). That access easement will be managed for public use and entry onto the Beckman WMA.

Future

Motorized vehicles will be allowed seasonally on the two existing designated roads on the WMA. These roads will lead to 2 designated parking areas located on the river bottom at road end (Map 1). Continued access along the county road as it passes the WMA will be allowed. Public access by foot or horseback will be allowed off-road from April 1 to December 15, annually, on all acres.

It is intended that a designated and improved public parking area will be established in conjunction with the 'USAF missile silo' access easement on WMA property.

Motorized vehicles will not be allowed off of the designated roads except for administrative use and/or the current agricultural lessees or contractors.

Camping is allowed on the Beckman WMA in any of the designated parking/camping areas. Camping rules comply with MFWP Administrative Rule 12-8-205, which limits camping in designated camping areas to 14 days and prohibits camps from being left unattended for more than 48 hours. Primitive overnight camping will be allowed outside of designated parking/camping areas along the river. Primitive camps will be allowed for a duration of 1 night and must be packed in by foot or boat. These rules will also apply to the Barber Property addition.

Physical Developments

Present

Existing physical developments on the Beckman WMA include external boundary fences (fair condition), internal pasture fences (poor to good condition), 1 older home, 1 older barn (fair condition), a set of corrals (fair condition), 3 wells associated with the residence/corrals, and 1 developed spring (fair condition). There are also 3 electric pump irrigation systems (gated pipe, wheel line and hand line), and 1 flood irrigation system, that are in fair condition.

Addition of the Barber Property brings with it a functional livestock watering system originating next to Wolf Creek and the Bear Springs County Road. It is a pumped well with buried pipeline. Additional live water is present in Wolf Creek, of which $\frac{3}{4}$ mile flows through the Property. A serviceable cabin, calving barn and set of corrals exist in the vicinity of Bear Springs County Road along Wolf Creek.

All water rights connected with the Property will be conveyed upon purchase.

Future

For the duration of the livestock grazing lease-back provisions (until October, 2012) fence, corral and building repair and maintenance (in a condition equal to that at the time of purchase) remains the responsibility of the Barbers. Internal pasture fences may be

removed and/or constructed to accommodate any needed pasture realignment.

Wildlife

Present

Current wildlife use of the property includes the following animals (and/or groups of animals) and their present levels of use:

Primary species are mule and white-tailed deer. Mule deer occupy the upland coulees and ridges yearlong, but often make daily use of the alfalfa fields on the river bottom during periods when upland vegetation is desiccated. Mule deer numbers on the property fluctuate within and between years. Highest numbers are found during spring and fall. Through the years the lowest number of mule deer counted was 60, the highest number was 200. White-tailed deer, conversely, occupy the river bottoms yearlong except for brief forays to the uplands. Over the years their numbers have fluctuated between 20 and 50. Approximately 20 antelope utilize the WMA and Property intermittently on a seasonal basis. Mountain lions utilize the area occasionally, while bobcat, coyote, fox, badger and skunk are more common.

Addition of the Barber Property will continue the involvement of sharp-tailed grouse in future management plans. They are common on the westernmost grassland benches of the Property. Ring-necked pheasants are common in the Wolf Creek bottom. Merriam's turkey utilize the property during late spring, summer and early fall. Merriam's turkeys are present throughout the timbered coulees of the Property. A variety of songbirds, raptors, and small mammals use the area in undermined numbers on a seasonal or yearlong basis.

Future

Upon acquisition of the Property, habitat management strategies will be directed towards improving the habitat and carrying capacity for mule and white-tailed deer, pheasants, sharp-tailed grouse, and other ground nesting waterfowl species. Other wildlife species adapted to more residual and woody vegetative cover, as well as agricultural crops such as alfalfa, will benefit. Predator species associated with prey that prefer such habitats will increase in number. Wildlife species that are adapted to exploit heavily utilized habitats will decline.

AREA MANAGEMENT

Management Goals

The primary goal for management of the Beckman WMA, including addition of the Barber acres, will be to improve the condition of all vegetative plant communities. Implicit in this

goal is a focus to maximize the productivity of the land base while minimizing maintenance and management requirements/involvement. Increased carrying capacities for mule and white-tailed deer can be expected as vegetation conditions improve and adequate quantities of forage remain available during key seasonal periods (e.g., winter and spring). This should reduce deer use of adjacent landowner's crops and pasture lands. The improvement of the habitat for mule and white-tailed deer will also benefit other game and nongame wildlife species.

A second and equally important goal will be to provide public access to the property for sport hunting and other recreational pursuits.

Management Actions

The most essential and important components of a wildlife management area are soil and vegetation. Every management action on the Area will be aimed at maintaining or improving the condition of vegetation and soils. Vegetative manipulations to improve habitat for wildlife may include livestock grazing, rest from livestock grazing, chemical and mechanical treatment, prescribed burning, and/or other common land management practices.

A change from present grazing practices to other grazing practices can be expected over time. This may include continuation of livestock grazing, but under a system that incorporates different stocking rates and more rest and rotation of pastures. Initial efforts will focus on quantifying the condition and trend of existing vegetation and establishing long-term monitoring efforts.

Biological, chemical, and mechanical treatments may be employed to reduce the occurrence of noxious weeds, to renovate or establish hay/farm land, to establish stands of woody vegetation, and/or to stimulate rangeland vegetation. All MFWP actions to control noxious weeds will be in accordance with the Department's weed management policy.

The use of fire may be prescribed to manipulate plant communities. An example would be to modify plant successional stages to increase the occurrence of desired shrub species. Any such effort would be made in coordination with adjacent landowners and state and county officials.

Public use and access to the property will be managed consistent with MFWP's state and regional management objectives for WMA's. Recreation on the Beckman WMA is expected to increase. Deer and upland bird harvest in the area is expected to increase. Public use of the area will be consistent with resource protection goals (i.e., vegetation and soil stability). A winter use closure to all unauthorized activities will be implemented to address wildlife energetic needs (i.e., minimize the energy loss for deer and upland birds during energetically demanding/critical periods). This winter closure concept is in effect on all wildlife management areas within MFWP's Region 4. Other regulations as they specifically relate to this and other WMA's will also apply. These include permit-only fur

trapping activities and a closure to mountain lion hunting after December 15.

MFWP will coordinate with adjacent landowners in developing certain land management plans/practices. These may include, but are not limited to: cooperative grazing systems, developing land trades, conservation easements, and/or additional land purchases. All practices will be considered first to conform to the intent of Mr. Beckman's Last Will and Testament. MFWP will promote its block management and hunting access programs with adjacent landowners affected by the acquisition of the Beckman WMA and subsequently, the Barber Property. Public entities such as the Bureau of Land Management, Farm Services Agency, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, Fergus County Conservation District, Fergus County Extension Service, and the Fergus County Commissioners will be consulted and met with as requested and needed.

An annual "in lieu of taxes" payment will be made by MFWP to Fergus County in a sum equal to the amount of taxes which would be payable on county assessment of the property were it taxable to a private citizen (MCA 87-1-603).

Management Objectives

Manipulating vegetative plant communities on the Beckman WMA is expected to increase yearlong usage by mule and white-tailed deer, sharp-tailed grouse, and pheasants. The population objective is to have 120 mule deer and 60 white-tailed deer on the WMA during early fall. The population objective for ring-necked pheasants is to increase the number of males in spring to 5X the current number. The population objective for sharp-tailed grouse is to increase total numbers by 2X.

MFWP will continue its aggressive approach to weed management on the Beckman WMA. Noxious weeds will be identified, mapped, and controlled in a manner consistent with MFWP's Region 4 Weed Management Plan. There are 2 objectives for weed management on the Beckman WMA. (1) Stop the spread of noxious weeds, and (2) reduce the occurrence of noxious weeds on the Beckman WMA. MFWP will use its own personnel and/or private contractors, and coordinate with adjacent landowners and county weed boards for weed control.

Impacts

Proposed changes in management direction for the Beckman WMA -- adjustments to some land use practices -- will benefit the wildlife currently using the area. Improving habitat quality and quantity will assist in alleviating potential deer problems on adjacent private lands. Should game depredation occur, one or more of the following methods will be implemented: scare guns; temporary panels for haystacks; materials for permanent haystack yards; kill permits; and special hunting seasons. A combination of the above methods would be used as necessary to resolve problems that might occur.

Public use of the property will be guaranteed from April 1 through December 15. Use during this period will be consistent with the established management/travel plan.

Management Activities

Aerial and ground surveys and inventories of wildlife use of the area will be conducted. The area will be used on occasion for capturing and individually marking deer and other wildlife as research needs arise. Changes in numbers and patterns of use by deer and other big game and wildlife species will be documented. Vegetation sampling and evaluation will be conducted on a regular basis. Other land management specialists and agencies will be contacted as needed for technical assistance in order to implement specified management actions. Physical developments will be evaluated relative to management goals and objectives. Historic and cultural values and a final management plan will dictate the extent of physical development and activity that's needed. Entrance and boundary signs will be erected to facilitate public use and to inform the public of the benefits and opportunities in the area.

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